UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

FIFTY-FIRST SESSION

Official Records

THIRD COMMITTEE
29th meeting
held on
Friday, 8 November 1996
at 10 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 29th MEETING

Chairman: Mrs. ESPINOSA (Mexico)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 107: PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

AGENDA ITEM 103: ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN (continued)

AGENDA ITEM 105: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (continued)

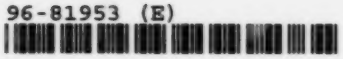
This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of the publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-794, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.

Distr. GENERAL
A/C.3/51/SR.29
13 August 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

96-81953 (E)



The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 107: PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE (A/51/293, A/51/493, A/51/499 and A/51/565)

1. The CHAIRMAN invited the Committee to begin its consideration of item 107, entitled "Programme of activities of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People".

2. Mr. FALL (Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights), introducing the agenda item, said that, as Coordinator of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, he would outline the activities undertaken during the past year in fulfilment of the goal of the Decade, namely, the strengthening of international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education and health.

3. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 50/157, an advisory group had been created to assist the Coordinator of the Decade. The group consisted of five members of the Board of Trustees of the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations, the Chairman/Rapporteur of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and a representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), cooperation with that body being essential to ensuring the follow-up of projects in the field. At the group's first meeting, it had been decided that resources should be allocated to six key areas, namely, implementation of the programme of activities for the Decade in relation to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action; ways and means of strengthening indigenous peoples' organizations; education and training in indigenous peoples' human rights; information on indigenous people and the Decade; exchanges of information between the United Nations system and indigenous peoples and among indigenous peoples themselves; and fund-raising activities for the Decade. The group had concluded that projects initiated within the framework of the Decade should be of direct benefit to indigenous populations and should be formulated in consultation with them. They should take account of gender balance and give priority to underdeveloped areas.

4. In September 1996, a workshop on the draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples had been held in Fiji. A joint project was being prepared, in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for providing human rights training to indigenous people in Peru and Ecuador. Following the workshop held in Copenhagen in June 1995 on the possible establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous people within the United Nations, a second workshop was being organized.

5. The open-ended working group of the Commission on Human Rights had held two sessions. At its first session, in November 1995, there had been a general exchange of views on the text of the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. At its second session, various articles of the draft declaration had been considered in detail. The Economic and Social Council had authorized 106 organizations of indigenous people to participate in the working group. In accordance with resolution 50/156, more than 20 representatives of

indigenous people had received financial assistance from the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations to enable them to participate in the sessions.

6. Concerning the possible establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous people, questionnaires had been sent to all the organs and specialized agencies of the United Nations system to permit an analysis of existing United Nations mechanisms and programmes for indigenous people, and the views of Governments and organizations of indigenous people had been sought, as requested in resolution 50/157. The responses received were analysed in the Secretary-General's report (A/51/493).

7. At its most recent session, the Commission on Human Rights had included a specific item on indigenous people in its agenda for the first time. By so doing, it had enabled the 13 organizations of indigenous people in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council to raise matters of concern to them.

8. At its 1996 session, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities had examined the issue of treaties between States and indigenous people and, in cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO), the question of the health of indigenous populations.

9. At the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), two major events had highlighted the housing problems of indigenous people. First, a special plenary meeting had been devoted to the issue. Secondly, a round-table discussion had been held on the theme "Indigenous people, housing and land" and had considered the following issues: land, housing and the role of indigenous people in sustainable development; land, housing and the right of indigenous people to promote and preserve their culture; participation by indigenous people in decision-making with regard to land and housing; and coexistence between indigenous people and urban development. The ideas which emerged from those two events had been incorporated into the Habitat Agenda.

10. By October 1996, the Trust Fund for the Decade had received contributions from Governments, non-governmental organizations and private bodies totalling some US$ 268,000. The generosity of donors was to be applauded. The proclamation of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People reflected the commitment of the international community to promoting and protecting the human rights of indigenous people, especially their economic, social and cultural well-being. The Fund's resources would be instrumental in achieving the goals of the Decade. He therefore appealed for continued contributions to the Fund.

11. Mrs. MORGAN (Mexico) said that her country was committed to building a new relationship with its indigenous communities, based on respect for differences and recognition of indigenous identities as essential components of Mexico's nationhood and legal system. The process of defining that new relationship had been intense. Mexican society and the Government were working with indigenous communities to build a nation enriched by full recognition of the country's cultural diversity and multi-ethnic roots.

12. Mexico was engaged in a process of amending the Constitution and the relevant laws in order to guarantee the rights of indigenous people, including

recognition of and respect for their customs and forms of social, political, economic and cultural organization. Expanding the participation of indigenous people in the country's political life, with full respect for their traditions, was also a priority of the legislative reform, as was ensuring their access to the system of justice.

13. Her Government was also committed to a comprehensive programme for meeting the basic needs of indigenous communities in the areas of health, education, food, housing, public services and communications. Teaching materials and textbooks were being published in 44 indigenous languages. The full participation of indigenous people in designing, implementing and evaluating individual programmes was an essential element of Government policy in that area. All levels of government and all sectors of society were working to fulfil an historic commitment. All countries with indigenous communities should recognize the rightness of indigenous culture and ensure the active participation of indigenous people in national development.

14. Mr. GARCÍA MORITÁN (Argentina) pledged his Government's sincere commitnent to the goals of the International Decade. Argentina had introduced important constitutional and legal amendments benefiting its own indigenous peoples, who had been actively involved in the drafting process. Besides enumerating the principal rights of indigenous people in Argentina, the constitutional amendments finally recognized the existence of indigenous populations prior to the establishment of the nation and its provincial governments. They also formalized the legal status of indigenous communities and guaranteed their right to ownership of the land on which they lived.

15. With the participation of representatives of different indigenous communities, a national plan for indigenous communities had recently been set in motion. A massive land-transfer programme had been launched, and an education and culture programme was promoting bilingual and intercultural education, access by indigenous students to formal education and the preservation of indigenous communities' traditions and customs. Lastly, a primary health care programme had been set up for indigenous communities to improve coverage while drawing on indigenous medicinal practices and training indigenous health workers.

16. Mr. SMITH (United States of America) said that the proclamation of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People reflected the international community's growing awareness of the special problems faced by indigenous communities. In the United States, November 1996 had been declared National American Indian Heritage Month. America's native peoples had made a valuable contribution to American life, teaching their fellow countrymen that human society could thrive and prosper without destroying the environment and that diversity could be a source of strength.

17. In the past, indigenous people had been the victims of terrible atrocities. Vestiges of that past persisted in the form of racism, discrimination and paternalism. The United States was committed to overcoming those problems. There was broad agreement that self-governance was the most effective means by which indigenous communities could protect their rights and preserve their culture and heritage. Under the Constitution, American Indian and Alaska Native tribunal governments enjoyed a unique "government-to-government" relationship

with the federal Government. In addition, tribes had the right to make and enforce laws and administer justice; choose their own system of government; raise and educate their children; and maintain independent cultural and social identities. Tribal courts had criminal jurisdiction over tribal members and were empowered to adjudicate in civil disputes. Recognizing that viable tribal justice systems were an essential component of self-governance, the Departments of Justice and the Interior were providing the tribal courts with training and technical assistance. The Federal government agencies were also strengthening their policies of cooperation with tribal leaders.

18. In the past, Native Americans had been pressured to give up the practice of their religions and, in some cases, their most sacred places and objects and even the remains of their ancestors. It was not recognized that the First Amendment of the United Nations Constitution, guaranteeing freedom of religion, applied equally to Native Americans. That principle had been enshrined in new legislation and President Clinton had recently instructed all federal agencies to allow ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites by Indian religious practitioners.

19. His Government had undertaken various measures to improve health care and education for indigenous people. Currently, the Indian Health Service operated over 150 health facilities, including 40 hospitals, while an increasing number of Indian schools were directly controlled by tribal boards of education. Job-creation programmes and schemes to encourage Indian entrepreneurship had been initiated in order to promote economic empowerment.

20. His Government was also participating in a number of international initiatives involving indigenous people. Those included the newly established Arctic Council, a regional forum designed to promote cooperation in the circumpolar North. Indigenous organizations had been named permanent participants in the council.

21. He hoped that the Decade would serve to remind the world that cultural diversity was as vital as biodiversity. His Government pledged to continue its efforts, in partnership with indigenous people and their representatives.

22. Mr. PEDRAZA (Bolivia) said that his Government was continuing its process of political and social reform which benefited Bolivia's indigenous people directly. Indigenous and peasant communities were gradually increasing their participation in the political process and native-language education had been successfully introduced at the primary level in the Quechua, Aymará and Guaraní communities. The recent Administrative Decentralization Act provided a mechanism for indigenous and peasant communities to make their needs known to the central Government through local governments; other legal measures had brought indigenous people into the national social security system and formalized their territorial rights.

23. Despite the international community's growing interest in the situation of the world's indigenous people, the conditions in which they lived had not greatly improved. His delegation noted with concern the limited number of donors to the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations, which meant that fewer representatives of indigenous peoples would be able to participate in the work of the open-ended working group. It called on the

international community and financial institutions to increase their support for the Fund and its vital activities.

24. Mr. FREEDMAN (International Labour Organisation (ILO)) said that since 1957, the ILO conventions had been the only international legal instruments to address the living and working conditions of indigenous and tribal peoples. The ILO approach to that question had evolved over time, however. The first instrument, adopted in 1957, had acknowledged the need to protect indigenous peoples but had taken an integrationist approach. By contrast, the most recent instrument, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989 (No. 169), recognized those peoples as distinctive communities within their national societies, having their own identify and traditions. Another fundamental change was the Convention's underlying premise that indigenous and tribal peoples should participate in the formulation of policies and programmes affecting them. The Convention covered such areas as land, education and training, recruitment and conditions of employment, handicrafts and rural industries, social security, health and means of communication. Thus far, 10 States, including two developed countries, had ratified the Convention. Countries with no indigenous population were being encouraged to consider how they might adapt their foreign assistance programmes to be of greater benefit to indigenous peoples.

25. In Guatemala, where a majority of the population was indigenous, the Government's recent ratification of the Convention was seen as a major step forward in the consolidation of peace, democracy and respect for human rights. Even in countries which had yet to ratify it, the Convention served as a tool for promoting discussion of the rights of indigenous people. The Parliament of the Russian Federation, for example, had been considering various practical measures to benefit the indigenous peoples of the north. The Convention reporting procedure suggested, but did not require, that Governments consult organizations of indigenous people in their country before preparing their reports on the implementation of the Convention. The Norwegian Government had invited the Parliament of the Sami people to comment on its report before it was submitted to ILO.

26. Recognizing the importance of inter-agency collaboration, ILO was strengthening its cooperation with a number of United Nations organizations and international and regional funding bodies, which were, in turn, taking the Convention as a framework for their own policies and programmes. Only by working closely and in partnership with indigenous communities could the international community come to understand their needs and respond effectively to them.

27. Mr. UQUILLAS (World Bank) said that while the participation of indigenous people in the planning and execution of projects financed by the World Bank had increased since 1982, there was a need for greater attention to legal issues bearing on land ownership, as well as for increased capacity on the Bank's part to follow up and evaluate projects involving indigenous people. As a result, the Bank had revised its lending procedures to include: (a) new criteria for identifying indigenous people that recognized and protected their rights; (b) emphasis both on protecting indigenous people from the adverse effects of development and on their right to participate in the development process; (c) incorporation of an indigenous perspective into such formal Bank procedures as environmental impact assessments, technical assistance and country and

sectoral analyses; and (d) the requirement that Bank-financed investment projects in indigenous population areas include an indigenous people development plan designed and implemented with their participation.

28. The Bank viewed land ownership and natural resources management; technical assistance and training; basic investment in education, health and other aspects of human capital that were adapted to indigenous peoples and their cultures; and better access to goods and services, including financial resources, as closely related factors which warranted special attention in tackling the poverty and marginalization of Latin America's indigenous people. In addition to directly financing projects or project components involving indigenous people, the Bank was gradually devoting more resources to training them as a means of institution-building. Activities in that regard included a pilot programme for the training of indigenous people in several Latin American countries, designed to strengthen indigenous organizations and broaden their development options, and projects for natural resources management, legalization and demarcation of indigenous lands, rural planning and community development which targeted or affected indigenous people throughout the region. The Bank had also broadened its definition of target population to include a greater diversity of groups and enable them to participate in and benefit from the development process.

29. Ms. SIBAL United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that UNESCO was providing assistance to indigenous people in drawing up projects to be implemented by both national and international institutions and was implementing projects in support of the Decade's priority emphasis on consolidating cultural identities and values, languages, traditions and forms of social organization. It welcomed the Manila Declaration, adopted on 2 March 1996 at the Global Indigenous and Youth Cultural Olympics/Summit for Peace and Sustainable Development (A/51/293), and had established a unit in its Sector for Culture to monitor activities relating to indigenous people.

30. In response to concerns expressed by indigenous organizations and Member States, UNESCO was stepping up information coordination between divisions and units at Headquarters and in the field in a number of areas. It had also launched a series of workshops for indigenous writers in Latin America, with a view to the publication of an anthology of contemporary indigenous literature to be presented at the 1998 World Conference on Cultural Policies, and was publishing grammar manuals in traditional indigenous languages.

31. UNESCO was supporting several projects presented by indigenous non-governmental organizations in the Pacific region and had convened an international seminar on the Maya cultural, environmental and urban heritage. It had launched a human rights project in collaboration with the Guatemalan Ministry of Education, aimed at training indigenous experts in customary law and disseminating educational radio programmes on human rights. Lastly, it was implementing natural and biological resource conservation programmes and projects through the Man and Biosphere Programme and the People and Plants Initiative. The recent People and Plants Handbook drew attention to the role of indigenous people in managing natural and biological resources.

32. In 1997, UNESCO planned to focus on education for indigenous populations and would seek to involve indigenous people directly in activities affecting them, on a basis of horizontal cooperation among equal partners.

33. Mr. NIKIFOROV (Russian Federation) said that the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People was an important factor in promoting and enhancing respect for human rights and reinforcing the principles of non-discrimination. He hoped that the Decade's programme of activities would be implemented fully and that problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education and health would be solved effectively through efforts at the national level and greater international cooperation. Development must be achieved on the basis of mutual respect for and understanding of the partnership between Governments and indigenous peoples.

34. One of the most important tasks of States was to create conditions for equal participation by indigenous people in the administration of State and public affairs and to develop their traditional economic pursuits and national culture. In 1996, the State Duma had adopted a law on the small indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation, which established additional legal guarantees for protecting their interests. His Government had set up the National Organizational Committee for Implementing the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People as a mechanism for carrying out the Decade's programme of activities. Lastly, his delegation considered the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples an important instrument for achieving the goals of the Decade and supported further constructive discussion of the document, as well as efforts by the international community to arrive at the optimum formula for a permanent forum for indigenous people.

AGENDA ITEM 103: ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN (continued) (A/C.3/51/L.19 and L.21)

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.19: Improvement on the status of women in the Secretariat

35. Mr. BALL (New Zealand) introduced the draft resolution on behalf of the sponsors, who had been joined by Albania, Algeria, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belgium, Bhutan, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, France, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, Italy, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Federated States of Micronesia, Morocco, Nepal, Netherlands, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Samoa, Swaziland, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, United Kingdom and Viet Nam. The draft resolution was more concise than its predecessors but retained their essential elements. Its objective was to achieve the goal of 50/50 gender distribution by the year 2000 in Secretariat posts subject to geographical distribution, especially at the D-1 level and above. It called upon the Secretary-General to ensure full and urgent implementation of the strategic plan of action for the improvement of the status of the women in the Secretariat, in order to achieve the goal contained in the Beijing Platform for Action for overall gender equality.

36. In paragraph 6 of the draft resolution, the words "administrative instruction ST/AI/412 of 5 January 1996," should be replaced by the words "this report (A/51/304)" and the word "further" should be inserted before "development" in the last line. The following paragraph should be inserted after paragraph 8:

> "Urges the Secretariat to increase the number of women employed in the Secretariat from developing countries, including at the D-1 level and above, particularly those that are unrepresented or

underrepresented, and from other countries that have a low representation of women, including countries in transition;".

37. The sponsors of the draft resolution hoped that it would be adopted by consensus.

38. Mrs. TAVAREZ DE ALVAREZ (Dominican Republic), Mr. NORAPHALLOP (Thailand), Mrs. LEGWAILA (Botswana) and Mrs. EDWARDS (Marshall Islands) said that they wished to join the sponsors of draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.19.

39. The CHAIRMAN said that Afghanistan, Chile, Colombia, Guinea, Jordan, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo and Zimbabwe had also joined the sponsors of draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.19.

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.21: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

40. Mr. ROSNES (Norway) introduced the draft resolution on behalf of the sponsors, who had been joined by Argentina, Belgium, Bulgaria, Fiji, Germany, Liechtenstein, Panama, Philippines, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Spain and Thailand. The draft resolution, which had been shortened and revised to take account of the Beijing Platform for Action, inter alia, urged all States that had not yet ratified or acceded to the Convention to do so as soon as possible, and emphasized the importance of full compliance by States parties with their obligations under the Convention. It invited States parties to make all possible efforts to submit their reports on the implementation of the Convention in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and approved the request by the Committee for additional meeting time, within the overall existing budget, to allow it to hold two sessions annually. the sponsors of the draft resolution hoped that, as in the past, it would be adopted by consensus.

41. The CHAIRMAN said that Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Guinea, Hungary, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Thailand and Zaire wished to join the sponsors of draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.21.

AGENDA ITEM 105: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (continued) (A/C.3/51/L.12, L.15, L.16 and L.20)

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.12: Follow-up to the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States

42. Mr. NIKIFOROV (Russian Federation), introducing the draft resolution on behalf of the sponsors, said that it was designed to implement the decisions taken at the Regional Conference and was the result of long and painstaking work by the countries concerned and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The sponsors of the draft resolution hoped that it would be adopted by consensus.

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.15: Assistance to unaccompanied refugee minors

43. Ms. WAHBI (Sudan), introducing the draft resolution on behalf of the original sponsors and Bangladesh and Morocco, said that a number of revisions should be made to the text. In the third preambular paragraph, the word "forced" should be inserted before "military recruitment". One paragraph had not been printed, which would have been paragraph 3. That paragraph read: "Expresses the hope that adequate resources will be provided for programmes of identification and tracing of unaccompanied refugee minors." Subsequent paragraphs should be numbered accordingly. New paragraph 4 should be amended to read: "Calls upon the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in cooperation with other relevant United Nations bodies, to incorporate into its programmes policies which aim to prevent refugee family separation." In new paragraph 7, the word "forced" should be inserted before "recruitment in military forces". The sponsors hoped that the draft resolution would be adopted by consensus.

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.16: New international humanitarian order

44. Prince Zeid Raad Zeid Al Hussein (Jordan), introducing the draft resolution on behalf of the original sponsors and Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Togo and Tunisia, said that several paragraphs were the same as in previous years, but a sixth preambular paragraph had been added to reflect the growing scale of humanitarian emergencies and the corresponding increase in the burden on the international community. That paragraph was intended to articulate principles which, through the practice of States and international organizations, had already become norms. The intention was not to downgrade the existing body of humanitarian law and international practice, but rather to strengthen them through adjustment to new realities.

45. Some revisions needed to be made. In paragraph 4, the words "including local and regional capacity-building to respond to humanitarian problems and the search for more effective measures to increase international cooperation in the humanitarian field" should be added after the word "concerned". In paragraph 5, the words "in a comprehensive manner" should be inserted after the word "report".

46. The draft resolution had no programme budget implications and his delegation would appreciate a more comprehensive report from the Secretary-General on the item at the fifty-third session. The sponsors hoped that the Committee would adopt the draft resolution without a vote.

Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.20: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

47. The CHAIRMAN informed the Committee that the draft resolution had no programme budget implications.

48. Ms. NEWELL (Secretary of the Committee) made a number of oral revisions to the text of the draft resolution as it appeared in document A/C.3/51/L.20. The fourth preambular paragraph should read "Commending the High Commissioner and her staff for the competent, courageous and dedicated manner in which they discharge their responsibilities," and a new fifth preambular paragraph should

be inserted, to read: "Paying tribute to those staff members who had endangered or lost their lives, and emphasizing the urgent need for effective measures to ensure the security of staff engaged in humanitarian operations,". In paragraph 8, the words "under the terms of" should be replaced with the words "for reasons enumerated in". In paragraph 12, the words "adoption of" should be replaced with "conclusion on". In paragraph 17, the words "through bilateral agreements" should be deleted. In paragraph 18, the words "and to fulfil" should be replaced with "as well as". In paragraph 20, the words "developing countries and" should be inserted between the words "in particular" and "those".

49. Mr. WILLE (Norway) announced that the following countries had joined the sponsors of the draft resolution: Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Cape Verde, Chad, Congo, Croatia, Dominican Republic, France, Ghana, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Mozambique, Nepal, New Zealand, Niger, Nigeria, Peru, Poland, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Swaziland, Thailand and Zaire.

50. Draft resolution A/C.3/51/L.20, as orally revised, was adopted.

51. Mr. YIP (Singapore) said that his delegation had reservations with regard to paragraph 3 of resolution A/C.3/51/L.20. Singapore had never recognized an unrestricted or automatic right to asylum. Moreover, paragraph 3 did not accurately reflect contemporary international practice on the right to asylum, which in recent years had developed towards a more restricted and qualified interpretation. In her statement to the Third Committee at the fiftieth session of the General Assembly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had noted "a decline in the willingness of States to grant asylum, even on a temporary basis."

52. Current mass population movements were the result of a number of factors which were new, structural features of the international system and would not go away, such as the end of the cold war and the globalization of the world economy. In order to cope with the consequences of those structural changes, countries in both the developed and the developing world were beginning to adopt more restrictive practices. All international norms evolved in response to changing economic and political conditions, and the principle of asylum was no exception. He therefore found it puzzling that certain developed countries should insist on the unqualified reiteration of a principle that they themselves denied in their national practice. It was better to acknowledge the reality of changing international practice than to pretend that the reality had not changed. Too great and persistent a divergence between principle and practice would only lead to growing cynicism and, ultimately, to the complete rejection of the principle in question.

53. Ms. WAHBI (Sudan) said that her delegation would have liked to sponsor the resolution, but had been unable to do so, in view of relations between UNHCR and the Sudan and the language used in the resolution with regard to UNHCR. However, she wished to stress her support for the resolution.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.